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ABSTRACT

The communicative approach to language teaching represents a widening of scope in one's view of the goal and range of activities rather than a rejection of earlier approaches or content. However, it does require that all ideas and techniques be reevaluated in terms of this wider conception of communication and learning. One method for combining new and old approaches integrates part-skills training, or pre-communicative activities, and whole-task practice, or communicative activities. The two branches of the model, the conceptual and the communicative, are linked at one extreme by creative language use (discussion, problem-solving, role-playing and simulation, purposeful reading and listening, learning through the foreign language, and fulfilling needs) and at the other by the internalization of structures and vocabulary. These objectives are accomplished on the conceptual, or meaning, side by situational teaching and information exchange tasks and, on the communicative or functional side, by functional teaching and role-playing tasks. Whatever the nature of the syllabus input, the links within the model allow the teacher to address various aspects of language, language usage, and language learning. (MSE)

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Integrating the New and the Old in a Communicative Approach

WILLIAM T. LITTLEWOOD

What is a "Communicative Approach"

When we talk of a communicative approach, as I understand it, we are referring in the first instance to the *goals* of second language teaching rather than to methods or techniques: we want to equip learners with the ability to communicate. In this respect, the audio-lingual or audio-visual approaches could also be called "communicative", since they too set out to develop communicative ability. However, if we ask why they never have been so labelled, we begin to pinpoint the main feature that characterises what we now call a "communicative" approach: a realisation that *communication learning* is not the same as simply *language learning* but that there are other dimensions to be considered:

(a) new dimensions with respect to defining the *goal*: the skills that learners need to acquire are not limited to using the structure of the language, but also include other skills, concerned with how to relate these structures to their communicative function, in appropriate ways, in real situations;

(b) new dimensions with respect to the kinds of *learning activity* that are needed in order to achieve this goal: learning to communicate involves much more use of language for communication in real situations than was often assumed earlier. Also, learning not only takes place through conscious, controlled processes: another important aspect of language learning is the kind of subconscious acquisition which occurs, again, when people use language for communication.

In other words, a communicative approach represents above all a *widening of scope* in our view of the goal and of the range of appropriate activities. It does not mean that earlier ideas and techniques have suddenly become superseded. What it does mean, however, is that *all* ideas and technics — old and new — have to be re-

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evaluated, within a new framework, in terms of our wider conception of communication and learning.

Some Sources of Confusion

The communicative approach has been influential for several years now and nobody can deny that it has brought about many exciting innovations, both in course design and in classroom methodology. On the other hand, it has also created confusion in certain respects. In its application to methodology, on which I propose to concentrate in this paper, I would mention three sources of confusion in particular:

1. First, because of the sudden new emphasis on communicative functions rather than forms of language, it has sometimes been taken as somehow providing an *alternative* to teaching the structural aspects of language. It is sometimes almost as if, by common consent of the language-teaching profession, language had suddenly ceased to be a system of structures, and it is this system, together with the vocabulary, that constitute the unknown elements for a person learning a new language. That is, it is not the functions themselves that a learner needs to master, but new ways of expressing these functions by means of a new language system.

2. Second, because of the realisation that learners need practice in communicating and that many traditional activities in the classroom do not themselves involve communication, it has sometimes been assumed that these traditional activities (such as drills or question-and-answer practice) must be rejected and *replaced* by activities which involve learners in "real communication". But this confuses the goal with the means. Even if the *goal* is communication, not every activity leading *towards* this goal has to involve communication. Like the swimmer or the piano-player, the second language learner may sometimes practise the separate *parts* of the total skill that he is aiming to improve.

3. A third way in which communicative language teaching has sometimes caused confusion is that it has often been presented to teachers as a collection of new "classroom tricks", especially tricks for setting up communication activities. There has often been less consideration of how these tricks fit into a coherent framework — how they relate to each other and other aspects of teaching. But however interesting and motivating they may be in themselves, even a

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thousand such tricks would be of limited use to a teacher, so long as he has not clarified the rationale behind them and worked out, *for himself*, how they fit into a coherent approach. Only then can he locate them in his repertoire and deploy them appropriately with the goal in view.

It is with this problem of locating activities within a total methodological framework that I shall be concerned in this paper. The main question that I shall ask is this: Now that we have all these useful and exciting ideas for teaching communition, how *do* they relate (a) to each other and (b) to the more traditional techniques in the teacher's repertoire?

Two Models of Language Learning

Before we consider different components of a communicative methodology, it will be useful if I make clear my assumptions with regard to two models of language learning which are influential, and often compete with each other, in our discussions about methodology. We might call them the "skill-learning model" and the "natural learning model".

1. The skill-learning model is the one that we are most familiar with in language teaching. According to it, language use is a performance skill. Like other skills, such as swimming or playing the piano, it can be divided into components, or "part-skills", which can be trained and practised separately. In addition to this part-skill training, a learner must also be given opportunities for "whole-task practice", in which the individual parts are integrated with each other in performance of the total skill. The aim is, of course, to build up towards performance which is correct and automated. In the case of swimming, for example, the part-skills would include the separate arm and leg-movements, and the whole-task practice would involve the integration of all the movements in order to swim. In language teaching, part-skill training would include isolating items such as structures or sounds for separate practice. Whole-task practice would involve actual communication.

If we take this model, some implications of a communicative approach would be:

(a) We need to recognise a wider variety of part-skills than before, e.g. the ability to relate language forms to their possible functions, discourse skills such as producing cohesion in writing or

using "gambits" in conversation, or communication strategies such as the use of paraphrase.

(b) Traditional procedures such as drills, correction or explicit grammar teaching have to be related to our broader conception of what the "whole task" entails and re-evaluated accordingly. The emphasis placed upon them will vary accordingly and some may be abandoned.

In some cases we shall find that activities which were hitherto regarded as "whole-task practice" (e.g., translation or dialogue-writing) fall short of this and are more appropriately seen as part-skill training.

(c) A communicative approach emphasises the key importance of whole-task practice as a component that cannot be neglected. Involving learners in different kinds of communication in the classroom is an essential part of their overall learning experience, particularly for those who have no opportunities for this experience outside the classroom.

2. The natural learning model has developed as people have paid greater attention to language learning (first and second) outside the school and have noted how communication skills are acquired without conscious teaching, simply as a result of involvement in communication. The term "creative construction" is often used to describe how learners apparently create a system of rules for themselves from exposure to the language. Many writers, of whom the best known is now Stephen Krashen, argue that these natural processes of "acquisition" are *the* crucial factor in learning a language for spontaneous communication.

This model attaches no importance to part-skill training. The sequence of development is not, in any case, amenable to direct manipulation through teaching. It involves not a step-by-step assimilation of separate bits of the language but a global process through which the learner constructs his own rules to account for all the language input he receives. Transferred to the classroom, it means that we should not try to control the learning process directly through drilling, error correction and so on, but should concentrate our efforts on providing situations for communicative language use (productive and receptive) in which learners are motivated and able to process the language — for example, listening activities, communication tasks and role-playing activities.

On the importance of communicative interaction, then, the two models agree. It can be seen as whole-task practice in terms of skill learning, or as an opportunity for natural learning to take place. The main point of difference between the two models, so far as the implications for language teaching are concerned, lies in whether part-skill training performs a useful function. In other words, should teachers continue to involve learners in controlled practice such as drilling?

The ultimate answer to this question must come not from theory but from practice. Does it prove *feasible* to structure the classroom in such a way that efficient learning takes place through communicative language use alone, to the extent that part-skill training serves no function? Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell, in their so-called "natural approach", claim that we can. The same problem is being explored in the Bangalore project, in connection with a task-based or "procedural" syllabus. For the time being, however, an approach based on natural learning alone does not seem to have been operationalised in such a way that it can be adapted to a wide variety of teaching situations. In this paper, then, I will assume a framework in which the requirements of both models can be integrated:

1. Part-skill training (which we might also call "pre-communicative" activity);
2. Whole-task practice (or "communicative activity"), which also provides opportunities for the kind of natural acquisition envisaged by the natural learning model.

Core Components of a Communicative Methodology

We can now look at the framework (see Appendix) which I am proposing as one way of relating to each other some of the main components of a methodology leading towards communicative ability. It is obviously very simplified and contains only some of the "core" types of learning activity. However, I think that other kinds of activity can be related to these and thus located within the framework.

The framework is not intended to mirror the learning process itself. Nor is it meant to suggest any particular sequence for the different kinds of activity. Rather, it is meant to show how different kinds of activity relate to each other within a conceptual or methodological framework.

1. The bottom box, which I have called *Creative Language Use*, contains the kinds of activity that constitute the *goal* of second language learning. At the same time, as I said earlier, they are also important as learning activities in their own right. As such, they form a major component of our methodological framework.

Within the natural learning model — e.g., in the "natural approach" — this box represents the *only* essential component in the methodology, leading automatically to the acquisition of the language system and communication skills.

Within this component, of course — as with every other — grading can take place, though we have not yet established clear principles for grading different kinds of communicative language use.

2. The top box is *Internalisation of Structures and Vocabulary*. As I said, the natural approach sees this as following automatically from creative language use. In a sense, the audio-lingual approach made the opposite assumption: that creative language use follows automatically once the structures have been mastered. In so far as the grammar-translation approach is interested in communication at all, it too would assume a direct link from learning structures and vocabulary to using them for communication.

Here we should point out again that "internalisation" can be understood in different ways in different contexts. In discussing the kind of controlled practice that takes place in a skill-learning approach, it usually means the assimilation of structures which have been pre-determined by the syllabus. In discussing natural learning, on the other hand, it means that the learner is subconsciously constructing rules for himself. As I said, an awareness of the possibilities of this second kind of internalisation has grown strongly in recent years, though the idea was also stressed by Harold Palmer in the 1920s, when he spoke of the importance of using not only our 'studial capacities' but also our capacities for "spontaneous learning".

Internalisation of the language system is, of course, a prerequisite for using a language creatively. However, it is only in a part-skill approach that this box forms an actual component of the methodology, in which activities can be devoted specifically to clarifying or drilling aspects of the language system.

3. One of the ways in which the traditions of English language teaching in Europe and Asia have differed from the extreme audio-

lingual tradition in America is in the importance they have always attached to relating language to its *meaning*, e.g., by practising structures in situations set up in the classroom or provided by pictures.

One outcome of the communicative approach is that teachers are now very much aware of *two* important kinds of meaning:

(a) On the one hand, there is the *Conceptual or Referential* meaning of language: the relationship between language and concepts and how language matches the real world around us. For example, if I say "*This tea is cold*", at this level of meaning I am simply referring to a state of affairs in the world. Language provides both a conceptual grid through which I can view this world and a means for expressing what I want to say about it.

(b) On the other hand, there is the *Communicative Function* of the language: how I am using the language to carry out communicative acts in society. Thus when I say "This tea is cold", I may be simply describing a state of affairs for somebody else's benefit. (In the language classroom, this is what a student might typically be doing.) But there are many other communicative acts that the words might perform. For example, they might constitute a request or demand for a fresh cup (e.g., in a cafe), a complaint, or a reproach. They might be intended to indicate that somebody must have left the room a long time ago.

Recently, attention has been fixed particularly on this second kind of meaning. We have been in danger of forgetting the importance of the first. In a recent paper Jack Richards calls it "propositional meaning" and argues that "the first task in learning to communicate in a language is to learn how to create propositions" (1983: 111) about the real world. It is in this context, it seems to me, that our communicative methodology still needs the techniques of "situational language teaching" or the "structural-situational method" — that is, the familiar battery of techniques by which questions are asked and answered about the classroom situation, pictures, texts, or other aspects of common knowledge.

These *Situational Techniques* have been one of the mainstays of English language teaching, for both oral and written practice, but have been one of the main targets for criticism by some supporters of functional approaches. The basic criticism is that they are artificial and non-communicative — why should anybody want to ask and answer questions about facts which everybody knows in any case?

Seen from the viewpoint of everyday communication, these criticisms are valid. However, our concern is with *learning* communication and, as I said earlier, not every activity for *learning* communication need be communicative itself. From the learning viewpoint, then, it seems to me that situational techniques perform two very important functions:

1. A *linguistic* function: they help learners to internalise the structures and vocabulary of the language.

2. A *conceptual* function: they help learners to relate the new language to their conceptual structures and to their vision of the world, which they have so far related only to their mother tongue. In some cases, this may involve learners in adapting their concepts and their world-view, in order to form new "cognitive habits". This internal, conceptual aspect of language learning has often been neglected in recent years, in favour of the external, social-functional aspect.

3. We have just seen that situational techniques can still perform important functions. As with all other techniques, however, they also have their limitations, especially when measured against the kind of communication which provides the goal and ultimate motivation for language learning. Can we compensate for some of these limitations by providing additional activities in which the information being talked about is *not* already known to everybody?

This is where we come to a set of techniques which have become closely associated with communicative language teaching, namely communication tasks or what I here call *Information Exchange Tasks*. In methodological terms, they are closely related to the situational techniques just discussed, but with the added dimension of an information gap which has to be bridged by exchanging information about, say, a picture or a map. This is necessary because not all students have the same information at their disposal.

Many such activities are now available to teachers and I will give just one example in order to show the link with situational techniques. Let us say that a picture has been used as a basis for language practice of the familiar kind. The learners have practised a range of structures and vocabulary, relating them to aspects of reality, but have not used them to transmit meanings for a communicative purpose. We can build in this additional dimension by producing a second set of pictures, identical to the first except that some of the items have been deleted. Half of the learners have the complete pic-

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ture and the others have the altered version. The learners with the complete picture must ask questions (perhaps using also some language that was practised earlier) in order to discover which items have been deleted from the second set of pictures.

Many other ways of creating tasks which involve the exchange of information are now available. By grading these tasks, introducing different interaction patterns and adding elements such as problem-solving, we can require more elaborated and creative uses of language. In this way we move further into the direction of communicative language use, which is the goal. Thus, by building on the relationship between language and conceptual meaning, through techniques of situational practice and information exchange of various kinds, our methodological framework provides a set of links between learning structures and creative language use.

We will now look at another set of links, starting from the other important aspect of meaning: *Communicative Function*.

4. We spoke earlier about the criticisms of situational techniques when these are measured against the nature of real communication. Another reaction to these limitations is to focus on the other important aspect of meaning — *Communicative Function* — and cater for the learners' need to practise a variety of communicative functions, using socially appropriate forms. In selecting communicative functions to be practised, we can draw on an inventory such as that of the Council of Europe, which has been used as the basis for many syllabuses and course-books.

We thus have the possibility of what I call in the diagram *Functional Techniques*, in which the learners' attention is focussed not on a particular structure but on a particular communicative function. For example, we can have controlled practice in which learners are instructed to make a series of suggestions or ask directions to a number of places, using forms which have just been taught.

Like situational practice, this is a form of part-skill training. We should also note that as a learning activity, it is no more "realistic" or "communicative than question-and-answer practice about pictures. It simply picks on a different dimension of meaning for the main focus of the practice.

The dotted line indicates that there is no sharp distinction between situational and functional techniques. The former could be seen, indeed, as providing practice of the communicative functions

"asking and giving information". Also, with functional techniques, the element of mapping language onto the real world is often introduced when, for example, visual cues are used as a way of indicating to the learner what suggestions he should make or what place he should ask for directions to. Generally, however, there is a difference in the main focus of situational and functional techniques, which is often reflected in the way the activity is presented to students.

At this point, it is useful to compare how situational and functional techniques treat grammatical aspects of language.

(a) Structural-situational techniques, as we know, take grammar as their main input. Basing this input on a graded progression, the aim is to lead learners to a full insight into the patterns they are practising. They are generally expected to know what grammatical role each word is performing, so that they can manipulate all the elements in new sentences.

(b) Functional techniques, on the other hand, often work with what one might call a "slot-and-filler" approach to grammar. In this, learners may only have a limited insight into the system of the language they are using, but have to fill individual slots with language items relevant to the function they are practising. We can compare this with the 'prefabricated patterns' which have been observed in child language acquisition. As with prefabricated patterns, one result of this approach to grammar is that communicatively useful pieces of language can be mastered at very early stages in the course. What is not clear, is the role that such pieces of language perform in enabling learners to internalise, eventually, the system which underlies the language.

I do not believe that these two approaches to grammar are necessarily in conflict with each other. In fact, they seem to complement each other. Through structural-situational techniques, learners can acquire insight into the system, but they may be limited in their capacity to use this system appropriately for a variety of communicative functions. Through functional techniques, learners can develop a capacity to relate language to its functions, but they may develop only limited insight into the underlying system and therefore be restricted in their creative ability. By a balanced mixture of techniques, we may hope to lead learners to both linguistic competence and competence in performing communicative functions.

Since we have just mentioned two perspectives on grammatical

aspects of language, we should perhaps also mention again the important third perspective touched earlier: the internalisation of grammar as a process of spontaneous acquisition through communication.

5. Functional techniques such as the ones just discussed attempt to simulate, on a small scale, real-life contexts in which people express the communicative functions in question. If a learner can adopt the most appropriate psychological set towards the task, he will imagine himself in the role of a person who 'makes suggestions' or 'asks directions' in everyday situations. Of course, the constraints on the learner to make this imaginative leap are not strong when the activity consists only of a series of unconnected acts of suggesting or asking: there is no coherent situation in which the learner can believe and, in particular, he has little or no freedom to choose what meanings he wants to express. If we want the learners to invest more of themselves in the activity, we must engage them in activities where the simulated context is more strongly reinforced and there is more choice, so that they begin to express communicative intentions which are real to them. This moves us into the domain of *Role-playing tasks*, another important component of a communicative methodology.

The degree of choice or personal involvement can of course vary. At its simplest level, learners may be allowed some choice in (say) what suggestions to make or how to respond to a partner's suggestions during pair-work. At more creative levels, learners may be given more general instructions which provide the framework for the interaction but also supply a large amount of scope for individual decisions. The demands of the communication may also be increased as more complex interaction patterns are required or more difficult social conventions are imposed. In this way we move further towards the kinds of communication (or "whole-task practice") which constitute the goal of learning and another set of links has been completed in our methodological framework.

The role-playing element on the right-hand branch means that, usually, an important factor is to use language which suits whatever social conventions govern the role that the learner should identify with. This may create learning problems when a learner is expected to conform to social conventions which are in conflict with his own personality patterns. In other words, just as the left-hand branch

might involve the learner in adapting his *cognitive habits* to suit the new language system, so the right-hand branch might involve the learner in adapting aspects of his *personality* to suit new conventions of social expression. The extent to which courses should try to achieve this is one of the problematic areas of communicative language teaching. It depends, presumably, on the learner's own goals within his own learning situation.

The dotted line in the diagram indicates another link between the two branches of the methodology. Role-playing tasks may be structured in such a way that, in their roles, learners have to exchange information for a purpose. Conversely, an information-exchange becomes simultaneously a role-playing task, if the learners are asked to adopt specific social roles during the interaction.

Conclusion

As I said at the outset, I believe that one of our most important tasks is to work out ways in which we can integrate the many ideas and techniques now at our disposal, to form a coherent approach in which the old and the new have their appropriate place. My aim in this paper has been to outline one suggestion for a methodological framework in which we can conceptualise how some of the important techniques support each other and relate to each other in an overall system for helping learners to develop communicative skills.

Finally, I would like to make the point that provided we work within a methodological framework which relates the various components to each other, it may not matter whether the initial input from the syllabus to the methodology is provided in terms of grammar, functions or, perhaps, even communicative tasks. Whatever the nature of the syllabus input, the links within the framework will enable us to cater in appropriate ways for the other aspects of language, language use and language learning.

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APPENDIX

Core Components of Communicative Methodology